ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURE

An electronic mail system and method enables the originator of a message sent by electronic mail to select a date, time, or event at which the message and all incarnations of the message to self-destruct, regardless of the number and types of computers or software systems that may have interacted with the message, and/or to include processing and handling limitations. The necessary control over the message is achieved by encrypting the message and enabling viewing only through a viewer applet arranged to facilitate destruction of the message upon the occurrence of the selected expiration time, date, or event, and/or to implement the handling and processing limitations. A central server can be used to exercise additional control over the message by serving as a proxy destination, and by transmitting the encrypted message to the viewer applet. In the case where a central mail server is required to enable forwarding of messages, the central server tracks the messages and compiles lists including the identities of all individuals or groups to whom the message has been forwarded, and information on handling of the message by those to whom the message has been sent or forwarded.